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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 004045

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STATE FOR SA/FO, SA/A, S/CR, SA/PAB, S/CT, EUR/RPM
NSC FOR AHARRIMAN
OSD FOR BREZINSKI
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A, CG CJTF-76, POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/08/2021

TAGS: MARR NATO PGOV PREL PTER AF

SUBJECT: NAC VISIT TO KANDAHAR PROMPTS REQUEST FOR MORE
FORCES FROM ISAF

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Neumann. Reasons 1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) Over the course of two days, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) visited Kandahar Air Field (KAF), home of NATO Regional Command South (RC-South), to review PRT activities in southern Afghanistan and receive a briefing on Operation MEDUSA. On September 5, Kandahar PRT Commander LtCol Simon Hetherington (CAN) briefed several Permreps (those with national troops in the south) on the structure and tasks of the Kandahar PRT. Hetherington stressed the PRT's commitment to fostering development, despite a precarious security environment, but cautioned Permreps that "putting an Afghan face" on development (i.e., working closely with Afghan officials to make sure they were in the lead) meant "accepting an Afghan pace" (i.e., very slow) in moving forward.

¶2. (S) On September 6, the full NAC (accompanied by SACEUR and COMISAF) returned to KAF for a briefing on Operation MEDUSA. RC-South Commander Brigadier General David Fraser (CAN) explained that Operation MEDUSA, which began September 3, was designed to eliminate the threat posed by the Taliban to western Kandahar and Kandahar city. The Taliban's aim, he continued, was to isolate the city of Kandahar from the Government of Afghanistan's (GOA) influence. BG Fraser estimated that 500-700 Taliban were dug in about 20 kilometers west of the city. Of that number, 300 were judged to be Taliban-for-hire. These were not Taliban hardliners, he said, but "economic Taliban," earning more per day as a fighter than they could from the International Community. The 200 hardcore Taliban, Fraser judged, would defend their positions to the death. He warned Permreps that MEDUSA would be a tough fight in a tough place: despite the fact that Coalition and NATO troops had killed an estimated 2500 insurgents this summer (and 200-300 killed in the last week alone), replacement Taliban continued to stream in. (NOTE: COMISAF, attending the rehearsal drill for Op MEDUSA at KAF on September 1, called MEDUSA the first brigade operation in NATO's history, and repeatedly urged RC-South to treat MEDUSA as the operation on which the whole NATO campaign in Afghanistan would turn. END NOTE.)

THE ENEMY HAS PICKED UP ITS GAME

¶3. (S) Noting recent IED attacks in the south, the Spanish Permrep asked whether the suicide vehicle bombers were affiliated with al Qaeda or the Taliban. Fraser explained that IEDs were a tool used by insurgents to both to disrupt ISAF movements (such as the suicide attack on a Kandahar PRT convoy on August 23), and to settle old scores (such as the August 28 attack in downtown Lashkar Gah against a former chief of police). While it was true suicide bombers trained in Pakistan, Fraser told Permreps it was important to tackle the Afghan part of the problem: in order to be successful, the bomber needed Afghan housing and equipment as he prepared for his mission. Fraser added that he had good mil-mil cooperation with the Pakistanis on the southern border, including those Pakistanis working to stop the infiltration of Taliban into refugee camps in Pakistan for recruiting purposes.

¶4. (S) Responding to Canadian and Norwegian questions about timelines for MEDUSA, Fraser predicted "several months" of fighting that would continue "into the fall." He pointed out that the battle had begun two months ago, before the transfer of authority to NATO. In the meantime, the enemy had "picked up its game" and was everywhere -- preaching a pro-Taliban message in mosques, and sending night letters to Afghans supporting the International Community. Although ISAF had managed to deny freedom of movement to the Taliban inside the city, Fraser warned Permreps that Kandahar remained the Taliban's "center of gravity," and that the Taliban believed the city was worth dying for.

¶5. (C) The Turkish Permrep asked how the Taliban paid its

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soldiers-for-hire and bought equipment. "From drugs," Fraser responded bluntly. The Panjwayi area of western Kandahar was a major poppy-producing district -- another reason, Fraser said, that the Taliban would fight to the death to protect the area.

¶6. (C) In response to the Latvian question of what the GOA should be doing, Fraser stated the GOA needed to deliver effects in the provinces. They need to get out more, he stated, and talk to Afghans. The GOA needed to be seen to be listening to the people of Afghanistan. In addition, the central government in Kabul needed to push more resources down to the provincial level -- police and army in particular -- and loosen the purse strings. In other words, Fraser concluded, "show the people of Afghanistan that the Government of Afghanistan means something."

NEED MORE DEFENSE RIGHT NOW...

¶7. (S) Fraser thanked Permreps for the Allied forces that were already augmenting Canadian forces in the south for MEDUSA. RC-North had agreed to send French reinforcements from Kabul (NOTE: subsequently refused by Paris), and two U.S. companies were coming in from the East. Fraser appealed to the NAC for more troops -- to win the fight, and more resources -- to extend the GOA's reach in southern Afghanistan. Fraser also pointed out that as the GOA solidified and expanded its influence in the south, ISAF would need more resources to support the government's efforts.

¶8. (S) The UK Permrep asked about the implications of Operation MEDUSA for the rest of the south. Fraser reiterated his appeal for a reserve force ("I only have one platoon right now.") RC-South was "robbing Peter to pay Paul" with the Portuguese replacing the Romanians as the KAF perimeter guard force, so the Romanians can reinforce Zabul province. "If I were king for a day" Fraser added, "I'd request several battle groups." Fraser predicted that the Taliban would expand into Nimroz and Day Kundi (the two

provinces in RC-South without an ISAF presence) in the future.

¶9. (S) The U.S. Permrep asked whether development efforts had been stymied by the battle rhythm -- "It looks like we can't walk and chew gum" -- and whether the battle had implications for NATO's move to Stage 4 TOA in RC-East. Fraser claimed that the development agenda was not hostage to the security situation, explaining that the military was doing development "right behind the battle" (50 tractors were being given to Panjwayi elders via CERP funds). For the long term, he added, the PRTs would contribute to the "Three Ds" (Defense, Development, Diplomacy). As to Stage 4, Fraser commented that from his perspective, having participated in both OEF and ISAF in the south, it was one thing to have the voices of seven coalition partners with you, quite another to have all of NATO standing beside you.

¶10. (S) COMISAF also thanked Allies' willingness to join the fight for the south -- the French would be coming down from duties in Kabul (NOTE: this did not happen), the Dutch came "without question" and the U.S. disengaged from Operation Enduring Freedom in the east to help. With this help, COMISAF said, we can balance our forces. That said, COMISAF added his own urgent plea for enablers. We can balance forces, he said, but not forever.

...NEED MORE DEVELOPMENT/DIPLOMACY FOR THE LONG TERM

¶11. (S) BG Fraser emphasized to Permreps that ISAF was fighting a counterinsurgency, which could take years to win. The enemy, he stated, hoped NATO would grow discouraged, give up and leave. COMISAF stressed the multidimensional nature of the operation, and urged Permreps "to respect the fact that success could not be achieved overnight." He also stated that more needed to be done in the civilian fields,

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and urged the Development and Diplomacy pillars "to up their game."

¶12. (U) Ambassador Nuland did not have an opportunity to clear this message.

NEUMANN